

Lando Calrissian: Idiot's Array

by Rich Handley



Lando Calrissian surveyed the spires of Cloud City, drinking in the beauty and grandeur of the Bespin mining colony, and pretended that he didn't hear his name being hailed over the com speaker. The floating city's myriad luxury hotels, casinos and upscale housing filled the scarlet, cloud-filled skyline, masking the factories, refineries, repulsorlifts and tractor beam generators dominating the city's lower levels.

Even now, more than a month after winning the city in a high-stakes sabacc match, Lando still couldn't believe he'd pulled it off. After more than a decade seeking fortune and adventure, the entrepreneur and gambler had finally gone respectable. He'd assumed the title of baron administrator, accepted responsibility for the daily operations and more than five million inhabitants of Cloud City -- and he liked it. But it entailed a lot of hard work and stress, and relaxation time was a far rarer commodity than the Tibanna gas his city produced.

A flat, metallic voice from behind him broke through his reverie. "Begging your pardon, Baron Calrissian, but Sir instructed me to remind you of your meeting with Queen Sarna." The voice retained just enough human features to distinguish it from the artificial speech of a droid.

"Lobot, don't call me Baron," Lando replied with a sigh, following the shaven-headed cyborg down a long glass corridor overlooking the city. "And what's the rush anyway? Sarna made the trip here all the way from Drogheda. She could wait another couple of minutes."

"My apologies, Baron. I tried contacting you several times on your private channel and over the station's intercom system, but I received no answer."

Lando glanced sideways at his chief administrative aide. "I must have missed that."

"Yes, sir. Madame Sarna awaits, sir." Lobot's countenance betrayed no shift in emotion, but in the six weeks they'd worked together, Lando had come to recognize subtle changes in the cyborg's body language, and his posture was even stiffer than usual.

Lando exhaled. "Uh, look, Lobot, I didn't mean to jump on you like that." He placed a hand on his liaison's shoulder. "I guess this whole 'respectable baron administrator' thing has been a bit overwhelming, that's all. I can't gamble while I'm in office. Someone's been trying to kill me, so I can't go anywhere without guards. And every little thing that goes wrong, I have to fix. Sometimes I miss hopping around the galaxy with Vuffi or Tocneppil, or even Dash. Life was easier back when I was playing the rogue. More dangerous, yeah... but more fun. I miss the adventure, Lobot. Sometimes I really miss being a scoundrel."

Lobot approximated a slight smile and nodded. "I understand, sir. The role of baron administrator can be a tiring and thankless task, with little opportunity to enjoy the amenities this complex offers. Perhaps that is why so many of your predecessors took to illegal pursuits to enhance their stay here. That you have not done so is a testament to your character; that you have brought about so many positive changes in Cloud City's management proves you worthy of the title. Know that those of us who financed your final sabacc match against Baron Raynor feel more than compensated for our investment, and that I take no offense at your occasional emotional releases, for you will never be the cruel despot he was."

Lando blinked. "Well, thanks, Lobot. I appreciate that."

"You're welcome, Baron," Lobot replied, his expression unchanged. "This way, please." He extended an arm toward Lando's office.

Lando raised an eyebrow, still unsure how to tell when his associate was joking. He reached for a wall-panel, but before he could release the door, a low, deep rumbling grabbed his attention. It apparently caught Lobot's as well, for he threw himself at his employer, knocking him hard to the ground and covering Lando with his own form.

The explosion blew the plasteel door clear off its frame and far down the corridor they'd just traversed. Had Lobot not acted so quickly, Lando realized, both would have been cut in half. Oily smoke poured from the room, and licks of flame shot out into the hallway for a moment before foam retardant sprayed from overhead, extinguishing the fire. Lando and Lobot slowly stood and surveyed the damage. Where once was a lavish office and several surrounding rooms, now there was only smoke and debris.

Lando tensed. "Sarna!"

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"Some sort of droid made to resemble a human, sir," Trooper Jerrol Blendin said in astonishment as he held up the charred remains of an arm trailing a mass of fused wiring. "Not very well-designed, though, despite how lifelike it once looked." Blendin handed Lando the burnt appendage. "Stupid thing blew itself apart before you were even in the room."

Lando fixed the guard with a hard glare. "So you think it should have waited 'til I was in the room -- is that what you're saying?"

"Yes, sir. Whoever sent it obviously meant it to--" Blendin stopped short, his facial muscles tightening as he stammered, "Well, no, sir. I mean, I'm glad it didn't kill you, sir. I just meant that... well..."

Lando grunted. "Relax, Blendin. I'm just frying your sensors." He turned the arm over a few times in his hands. "How is this even possible? No one's made this kind of advance in cybernetics."

"Well, I've never seen anything like it before, though I have heard rumors of some experiments in this sort of thing."

"And this wasn't a cyborg?"

"No, sir," Blendin shrugged. "There was no trace of organic matter in the wreckage."

"A droid that looks like a human..." Lando shook his head skeptically. "Any idea who'd send a replica of Sarna here to kill me, or why?"



Blendin shook his head. "No, sir, we're still looking into that. However, I've contacted Drogheda, and they say the Queen was unaware of the meeting. Maybe whoever did this was trying to sabotage Tibanna shipments to Drogheda."

"I don't think that's it." Lando scanned the room and signaled to Lobot, who excused himself from the wreckage team he'd been assisting and joined the discussion. He handed the arm to the cyborg. "Lobot, that's three attempts on my life in the past week. But this one was different. That explosion could have taken out half this section, killed thousands."

"Do you wish to enact a station-wide alert, Baron?" Lobot inquired.

"I'm considering it, but there's something I want to discuss with you first. And don't call me Baron." He turned to Blendin. "Thank you, Trooper. Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir," Blendin replied crisply, returning to the blast site.

Lando turned to Lobot, indicating the arm. "There's the culprit, Lobot. Cousin of yours?"

Lobot raised an eyebrow dryly, but said nothing.

"All right, my cybernetic friend, I need your help. Where do we stand here?"

"Situational analysis is unfavorable, sir. The assassin has abandoned concern for the safety of bystanders, making this a very real threat to the city. The rooms destroyed in the blast were thankfully unoccupied, but this individual will undoubtedly strike again, and we should not assume we will remain free of casualties when that happens."

Lando massaged his temples to quell his growing headache. "That's what I like about you, Lobot: always thinking positively." He cocked his head silently, and Lobot waited until he spoke again. "I'm the threat to this station, Lobot. Someone wants me out of here, and we're no closer to figuring out who it is than we were with the first attempt. I can't wait around for the fourth try to kill the citizens of Cloud City. As long as I'm here, everyone else is in danger."

Lobot pursed his lips slightly. "That would seem to be the case, sir."

"Well, maybe we can use that to our advantage, then."

"Sir?"

"It was nice knowing you, Lobot, but it's time for me to die."

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News of Lando Calrissian's unexpected demise was broadcast throughout the sector. Memorial services were held on a floating platform high above the surface of Bespin, with coverage from Ugnaught reporter Ars Fivvle and the rest of the *Action Tidings* news team.

"Nice services. Drab color scheme, though." In the cockpit of the *Cobra* in orbit over Beshpin, Lando switched off the broadcast and turned to his co-pilot. "Lobot, I hope I haven't just tricked myself out of a very valuable operation."

"What you have done, sir, is tricked the general population into believing you dead, leaving us free to expose those responsible for the attacks. The risk to your personal assets, I should think, would be secondary."

"A risk to my assets is never secondary, ol' databank," Lando replied. "All right, then, we've set the bait, and we're hiding out safely in the Yucrales Sector. Now we need only wait and see who tries to buy the city. No one would go to that much trouble to remove me from the picture without trying to reap the rewards. My credits are on Drebbel."

"Perhaps, sir. Drebbel was publicly humiliated when I exposed that he'd bribed Raynor's dealer, and he lost favor with your predecessor. However, would that not make me a more appropriate target for his revenge?"

"Well, Drebbel's never been the brightest crystal in the 'saber. I wouldn't put it past him to mess up something straight-forward like revenge if it..." Lando trailed off, and Lobot turned in curiosity.

"Is something wrong, sir?"

"Yeah, Lobot. I am. A halfwit like Barpotomous Drebbel isn't cunning enough to pull off three assassination attempts without leaving a clue to his identity. He'd just as soon forget his identicard in the door. He's also not cold enough to endanger an entire city to kill one man. No, we're dealing with someone far more dangerous."

"There is something else, sir. All along, we've been assuming the attacks were only aimed at you, but what if that's not the case? The Gank who tried to shoot you the first two times did so when I wasn't far behind, and the destruction of your office would have killed me, too. Perhaps we are both targets?"

"Excellent point." Lando stroked his mustache pensively. "And *that* severely limits our suspects. I haven't even been at the station for two months yet, so there couldn't be that many people who'd want both of us dead." He paused for a moment. "I've already ruled out Drebbel, and I can't see the corrupt guards we fired, or the thieves we caught in the casinos and mines, going this far for revenge."

"EV-9D9, perhaps?"

Lando shook his head. "I doubt it. That crazy droid would have done the job herself, and slowly, so she could take pleasure from our pain. That leaves only one person I can think of."

Lobot nodded in agreement. "Raynor."

"Yep. Dominic Raynor himself. Before he left, he threatened me in front of a room full of witnesses, which is why I'd initially dismissed him as a suspect. He'd be too obvious. However, that might be exactly what he was banking on."

"It is plausible," Lobot agreed. "If that's the case, then we will need to--"

A shot off the stern of the *Cobra* rocked the ship and its occupants. Wheeling around, Lando frantically checked the instruments. His personal yacht was fortified with the latest in sensors, making it extremely difficult for another ship to approach unnoticed. That someone had done so did not help his headache in the slightest.

"Where did that shot come from?" Lando yelled in frustration. "I can't find a ship on any of my scopes! What in the Five Fire Rings of Fornax fired at us?"

Lobot paused as data fed into his cranial implants. Confirming the information with that streaming into the ship's nav console, he turned to Lando, uncharacteristically surprised. "Lando, this makes no sense. It appears we are being pursued by--"



"--an Imperial Star Destroyer," Lando finished, his face illuminated by what now occupied the *Cobra's* viewscreen. "But where'd that ship come from?"

The Star Destroyer's pointed bow filled the screen, no stars visible beyond the massive gray wedge dwarfing the infinitely smaller yacht. Two more shots rocked their craft, and a dislodged hose filled the cockpit with steam. Scrambling to re-connect it, Lando punched the exhaust button and flicked a series of switches as the steam dissipated. "The Imps don't have a cloaking device that would let them sneak up on us like that, and there's no trace of a hyperspace jump. What's going on here, Lobot?"

As if in answer, a tractor beam grabbed hold of the smaller ship and began towing it toward a

landing bay on the underside of the Star Destroyer. Lando threw a lever to his right, hoping to break free of the tractor. The whine of strained metal filled the cabin, and a popping noise he couldn't identify sounded from astern. He cringed. "I've got a bad feeling about this." He fired repeatedly at the cruiser, which had no effect on the tractors.

Lobot turned to reply, but a broadcast from the cruiser cut him off. "Attention, *Cobra*," a cold female voice intoned. "This is the Imperial Star Destroyer *Faceted*. Disengage engines and surrender immediately. Our tractors out-power your engines. Resist any further and you'll blow your ship apart."

"Lando, she is correct," Lobot warned. "This ship cannot bear the strain much longer."

Lando stared wordlessly for a moment, then reached for a toggle. "Fine, I guess I have no choice but to--"

"Wait, Lando, do not yet disengage." The LCDs along Lobot's cybernetic headpiece flashed wildly as he downloaded a new stream of data. "Something is not right. The power output is inferior to what a ship of that class produces. Moreover, spectral analysis of the laser hits we've sustained does not match that of traditional Imperial armaments. Whatever it might be, that ship is not a Star Destroyer."

Incredulous, Lando faced his aide. "Not a Star Destroyer? Lobot, it's triangular, it's bigger than a pregnant Oswaft and it's pulling us right into its belly as we speak. It sure *looks* like a Star Destroyer to me!"

"Nevertheless, Lando, it is not."

"So you're saying...?"

"It's a hologram."

Lando stared skeptically. "A hologram that can fire and has tractor beams?"

Lobot received more input. "There *is* a ship out there, but it's not much larger than the *Cobra*." He fingered the buttons on his headpiece with all the grace of a Bith musician playing its fanfar. "I shall have its location pinpointed momentarily."

"Attention, *Cobra*," the female voice repeated. "Our sensors show you haven't disengaged your engines. Do so now, or be destroyed."

Lobot looked up. "I've identified the ship-type. It's a YT-1300 freighter."

YT-1300, Lando mused bitterly. *The Falcon*? He recalled his falling out with Han Solo, but cold-blooded murder wasn't Han's style. Deep down, past all his resentment at Han's betrayal, Lando felt there was still a bond between them, and he hoped he never found himself in a position where he'd be forced to betray a friend.

"Its signals are masked to make it appear an Imperial cruiser," Lobot added after a pause, "and its tractors are being bounced to hide their true point of origin."

Lando frowned. "Deep Space Target Practice Units, maybe? I've heard those target drones can be used to transmit a false scanner image. The Oswaft used a similar trick at ThonBoka."

"No, sir. I believe the technology employed is a good deal more complex than that."

"Well, then lucky for me you're here, ol' keypad." Lando's jaw clenched tensely. "Lobot, I need more information if we're going to get out of this. Can you locate the hologram projector and the tractors?"

"Stand by."

"In a moment, there won't be much left of me to stand anywhere!"

"I've got it, sir. Transmitting readout to your console now."

"Time to kick the ronto, Lobot!" Lando punched up the readout, fed the data to ship's weapons and fired at the areas Lobot indicated. Brilliant sparks flared in the vacuum of space before quickly extinguishing, and with them went the entire Star Destroyer. "Yeeeahhh!" Lando yelled jubilantly, clapping his comrade's shoulder.

With the tractors disabled, the *Cobra* shot rapidly away from the freighter that had replaced the larger cruiser. Lando quickly powered down the engines, then swung the ship around to face their attacker, shooting one of its gun turrets clean off. He toggled the intercom. "Alright, you posers, care to continue this fight, or are you afraid of an even battle?"

In response, lasers lanced out of multiple ports on the freighter, pummeling the *Cobra* mercilessly. Console after console exploded around the cabin, the lights flickering sluggishly.

"What the--?" Lando shouted in exasperation. "That ship was firing from places there shouldn't even *be* any weapons!"

"Their weaponry has been heavily modified," Lobot calmly replied.

"Thank you, but I would have appreciated that revelation a little sooner!"

"My apologies, Baron."

Lando leveled an askance glare at his co-pilot.

The voice addressed them once more, accompanied by the image of a human female in her mid-thirties. Blonde hair close-cropped, she wore the hard countenance of one accustomed to physical labor. Her voice was strong but even-toned, her tunic simple and unadorned. "You'll regret that one, Calrissian. That holo-projector drained a lot of credits, and the echo tractor was one-of-a-kind. My contract says I can't kill you and still collect, but the damage to the *Faceted* is going to cost you."

Lando and Lobot glanced at one another. *Contract? Collect?*

"So, you're a bounty hunter," Lando simply said, ignoring her threat. "And here I thought I was dealing with somebody formidable. You're just a hired thug."



Her eyes narrowed. "Don't test me, Calrissian. You're not my only job. And don't bother trying to escape -- I've got a tracer buried so deeply on your ship, you'll never find it. I can find you, no matter where you go."

Lando peered at the ship's diagnostics. Weapons offline. Hyperspace engines marginally functional. Fuel and oxygen levels dangerously low. He knew she had the advantage, and what's more, he knew *she* knew it.

Pure sabacc. Of course, that never stopped a seasoned gambler. After all, an Idiot's Array beat even pure sabacc, and a good bluff could beat any hand at all.

Lando smiled at the hunter, pouring on the charm that had won him more than his fair share of female...gratitude. "Apparently, we've gotten off to a wrong start. I don't even know your name."

"Thune," she replied coolly.

"Is that a first name or a last name?"

"Thune."

"A lovely name," he lied. "I'm a wealthy man, you know. I could triple whatever your employer is offering, plus I could provide enticements more...valuable than credits. Surely a lady of your intelligence and loveliness can see that--"

"Stow it, Calrissian. I know you fancy yourself a ladies' man, but I'm immune." On screen, four suited figures space-walked between the ships, carting a large container between them. Thune continued. "I've got a dozen guns trained on you, and I know your ship's condition. Hold position while I send someone to detain you and your cyborg. If you try anything, I'll scrag the contract, and your usefulness to me will end right now."

The screen went dark, and Lando rubbed his chin. Alright, then, it was settled. "Lobot, prepare for a standing jump to hyperspace."

Lobot's eyes widened in a rare show of emotion. "A standing jump? Sir, that course of action is most unrecommended. Our extreme proximity to the *Faceted* could prove disastrous if we engaged lightspeed engines, and we have neither the weapons to fight nor the means to escape her tracking system."

"You're right, my friend -- we don't. What we *do* have, though, is something better. We have Mungo."

"Mungo, sir? I'm afraid I'm not following you. What's Mungo?"

"Mungo's not a what, he's a who. Mungo Baobab, proprietor of the Baobab Merchant Fleet of Manda. I financed his early Roonstone expeditions several years ago. He's owed me ever since. As it happens, we're near enough to the Roon system for a jump to his operation

on Quilken. Mungo's a decent guy despite his rather brutish name, and almost as resourceful as I am. Not much of a gambler, but then, no one's perfect. I think it's time for me to call in my marker."

A sharp clang heralded the arrival of Thune's team as they affixed a portable airlock to the *Cobra's* top hatch. Another minute and they'd be inside.

"With all due respect, sir, how will that help us in our current predicament? Thune'll never allow us to reach Roon."

Lando flashed a toothy grin and gripped his liaison's arm. "Trust me -- I've used this little maneuver before. If we pull up so we're just nose-to-nose with the *Faceted* and then activate hyperspace engines, the flushback as we pass will wash over her ship, not ours. Half her systems will blink out before she even realizes we're gone."

"And if we don't time it right?"

"Well, then we'll never have to read another tedious Mining Guild report."

Lobot pursed his lips, then turned to prepare the engines. A moment later, he looked up again. "Standing by. I hope this works."

"So do I, ol' servomotor. So do I." He cracked his knuckles and keyed in course instructions to the computer before turning ship control over to Lobot. "Okay, let's do this. Pull the *Cobra* up as close to the *Faceted* as you can without touching her. Thune's not going to like that, so we'll have to move very quickly. There will be no room for error. Luckily, one of us has a computer for a brain."

Lobot said nothing as he studied the directions for a moment before easing the throttle forward. The *Cobra* shot ahead as though to ram the other vessel. Agonized screams filtered in over the com as the ship lurched forward, violently casting Thune's hired thugs off into space. Laser blasts stabbed from the *Faceted*, but Lobot piloted past them and came to a sharp halt barely a half-meter from the other ship's hull, then punched a final key on the navicomputer. The stars became thin shafts of light as the *Cobra* jumped to lightspeed. That he still existed told Lando their gamble had paid off...for now.

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"So there I am, sure as a Hutt that I've won. I throw down my cards and call 'sabacc.' The *Cobra's* mine again, I'm going home with a nice extra stack of credits in my pocket and I have the added satisfaction of looking *very* good in front of a beautiful lady! That Ymile was quite a looker, let me tell you. Too bad she was Raynor's mistress."

The storyteller paused for a moment to tip back his cup, savoring a long draught of the rich darkoma the barkeep had just set before him. It was his second, and he knew it would not be his last before the evening was through. His two companions exchanged surprised glances.

"That's it? *That's* why he got so mad?" Mungo Baobab scratched his graying black beard slowly. A broad, handsome fellow, he had a glint in his eyes that made him appear younger than his years. "From what I know of Dominic Raynor, he's got enough money that he could accidentally misplace my annual salary and not even realize it -- and I'm doing okay for myself. Why would such small stakes prompt the man to put a bounty on your head?"

"Ah, there's the rub, my friend," Lando replied, one long index finger pointing skyward. "That hand isn't what brought me here today, because I didn't win it. No sooner did I call 'sabacc' that Raynor threw down his own cards with this smug look on his ugly face. An Idiot's Array. I nearly choked."

"Idiot's Array?" Baobab's brows creased.



Lando threw up his hands. "I can't believe it. You still don't know any more about gambling than you did when we met on Socorro! How can you manage a casino if you don't even know what an Idiot's Array is?" Lando's laughter took the sting out of his words.

Mungo smiled, embarrassed. "Well, just because I own the place doesn't mean I'm a patron."

Leaning on Mungo's shoulder, a slight, dark-haired woman with tannish skin, wide eyes and ears slightly longer than average stroked his arm affectionately. "It's not his fault, Lando," Mungo's wife Auren said. "This resort is mostly for visitors to the Roon system. He's usually too busy arranging Roonstone shipments to Sim'char'ser and other worlds along the Outer Rim. I keep telling him to take time to enjoy all the great things he has here -- not the least of which is *me* -- but you know the Wook when it comes to gem-finding. Sometimes, I'm amazed he even stopped to marry me." She

toyfully played with the tail he'd tied in his jet-black hair. He, in turn, bent over and kissed her gently on the lips.

Lando smiled at her use of the nickname he'd given Mungo years ago. When they'd first met, Mungo had worn his beard long and unmanageable despite Lando's repeated advice to get it sculpted. He'd resisted for a long time. Auren Yomm (now Baobab), whom he'd

met at the Umboo colony on Roon, had apparently liked the new look, and the two fell in love. Since then, Mungo had taken great pains to look presentable at all times. His resemblance to a Wookiee had greatly diminished, but the nickname still stuck.

Lando drained his mug and leaned on one arm. "An Idiot's Array is a two of any suit, a three of any suit and the Idiot. Beats any hand. Raynor had one, so he won and I was broke. I didn't even have a way home, since he had my blasted ship, but an anonymous benefactor handed me five million credits to continue. I bet all I had, including my starship lot on Nar Shaddaa, against his four million and Cloud City, and he accepted. This time, I won the game, the money *and* the city. He lost power, and he lost face. He was so furious, he left without the *Cobra*, so I, uh, re-appropriated her."

A chime sounded from below table-level. "Speaking of that anonymous benefactor..." He detached the comlink from his belt and held it up to his mouth. "I'm here, Lobot. Go ahead."

"It appears, sir, you were correct in your assumption that Thune would track you here after effecting repairs," the cyborg responded crisply. "She landed a moment ago and is currently examining the ship. Apparently, she remains unaware of my presence beyond the outcropping."

"I guess she wasn't bluffing about that tracer." Lando exhaled loudly. "All right, it begins. If she's any kind of bounty hunter, she'll check my communications logs. Since I conveniently neglected to purge them before heading into town, she'll know exactly where I arranged to meet Mungo. That means she'll be here soon, so we'll be ready. Follow the plan, Lobot."

"Yes, Baron."

Lando sighed and shut off the comlink. "It's like Vuffi Raa never left."

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A little over two hours later, the thick metal door whooshed open to admit a new arrival. Tall and lean, she wore a nondescript grey tunic and dark blue trousers, both cut from a light fabric that perfectly framed her athletic form.

The woman stepped into the crowded room, just far enough for the door to close behind her. She scanned the casino for her prey, and it didn't take long to figure out where he'd gone. Holosigns near the back of the casino advertised the sabacc room--an ornately decorated chamber filled with game tables, mostly unoccupied. The essences of liquor and stale cigarra clung to the room like an incorporeal mynock, and speakers mounted around the casino piped in recorded music.

Thune visually scanned the casino before crossing the distance to the sabacc room. One hand hovered comfortably over the holster worn low at her side.

Lando was seated at a table near the rear, Mungo beside him. Both held sabacc cards in their hands. Few tables were occupied, though a long-haired Zeltron at the bar was making up for the lack of business, his pink complexion even rosier than usual as he added another drained goblet to the long line in front of him.

"You're a good student," Lando told his companion, "and you learn fast, ol' prospector. Unfortunately, it looks like you're gonna need to sign up for some remedial lessons at the Wheel." He smiled widely and slapped his cards down on the table: the Four of Staves, the Six of Coins and the Mistress.

"Sab--" Lando cried out jubilantly. He never finished the word.

Coming toward him at a brisk pace, Thune wore a grim expression, the muzzle of her blaster pointed unwaveringly at his head. "Keep your hands above the table," she ordered. "You too, Baobab. I'm here for Calrissian. I have no quarrel with you, but I won't hesitate to shoot if you intervene."

A woman in an ochre casino-staff uniform reached for a weapon. Thune's head cocked sharply as she sensed the movement. In one fluid motion, she dropped to the ground, shoulder-rolled to her left and swept up the Zeltron in an iron chokehold as she landed on her feet again. Before Lando was sure what had happened, Thune stood next to him, her blaster kissing his forehead and a knife at the throat of the drunken patron, who gasped for breath but had no success in throwing off her oppressive hold.

The other woman stopped short, caught off-guard by Thune's maneuver. Realizing she'd shown her hand too soon, Mungo's bodyguard tried to fire her blaster, but Thune shot her twice in the chest, leaving two smoking holes in her suit jacket. The smell of burnt flesh told Lando the shots had gone clean through her protective body armor. The woman gurgled, then stared at Mungo apologetically before slumping to the floor, unmoving. A moment later, Thune spun back to shoot a similarly clad guard, this one a man, who moved forward at Lando's left. Three quick bursts and he, too, fell over dead.



The room was eerily silent, save for the recorded disharmonious chords. Lando clenched his teeth at the sight of the dead bodies. Things were *not* going as planned, and he wasn't sure what to do about it. He'd intended to let Thune find him, hoping superior numbers would decrease her odds of success, and with Mungo's security personnel to apprehend her. However, people were dying because of him -- innocent people who'd risked their lives to save his. Leaving Cloud City hadn't stopped the killing. He'd been selfish to come here; he realized that now. He should have let Lobot subdue her back at the ship, away from anyone else, as the cyborg had suggested. Lando hoped their remaining plans would succeed without further deaths.

Thune returned her blaster to Lando's temple. Surveying the table, she chuckled in disgust. "Sabacc, at a time like this. How pathetically predictable. It was far too easy to find you, you know. You disappoint me."

Lando eyed her coldly. "Yeah, well, Mother Calrissian did always say gambling would be the end of me."

"She was right." Thune turned Lando's cards over. "Pure sabacc. Unfortunately for you, an Idiot's Array beats even pure sabacc." The bounty hunter indicated the blackened blaster holes in the dead guards' jackets. "Two in one suit, three in another," she said with a cold smile. "I guess that makes you the Idiot."

Mungo rose to face Thune, his cheek muscles clenched. "I strongly advise you to re-think this, bounty hunter. We process and export precious gems here from the Roon system -- you can't even begin to imagine the security I've got in place. If you think you can just stroll out of here with Lando after murdering two people, you're quite deluded, lady."

"The bounty on Calrissian was properly contracted, and I carried out the assignment. I have every right to take him," Thune replied. "Besides, I have two hostages, who'll die if anyone tries anything else." Mungo seethed silently. "Calrissian will now lead me to his cyborg. If not," Thune pressed the knife closer to the Zeltron's throat, "I slice Pinky. So back off, Baobab. This is none of your business."

"He's my friend and financial partner. That makes it my business."

"Fine," Thune shrugged. "Have it your way." She spun around to shoot Mungo, moving the blaster-barrel away from Lando's head for only a second. That was all the time he needed.

Faster than a Podracer, Lando flicked one arm up and out, releasing a small jeweled dagger that embedded itself firmly in the center of the bounty hunter's shooting hand. Thune cried out involuntarily as bones and muscles split. Dropping the blaster, she released her hold on the Zeltron to cradle her useless extremity.

As Thune's knife fell away from the Zeltron's throat, the man surprised the bounty hunter by spinning her around with far more grace and speed than someone of his apparent blood-alcohol level should have -- indeed, more than he'd shown a moment earlier. The Zeltron grabbed Thune's injured arm with one startlingly strong hand and thrust it hard behind her back, eliciting a pained grunt. With the other, he squeezed her opposite wrist, forcing her to drop the knife, then scooped both weapons from the floor and tossed the blaster to Lando.

Thune watched Lando with cold gray eyes as he circled the table, patted the Zeltron on the shoulder and halted in front of Thune, pointing the blaster at her mid-section. After a long pause, he spoke. "You know, that Idiot's Array punchline wasn't bad. A little on the melodramatic side, perhaps, and certainly an awful pun on the word 'suit,' but effective from a theatrical standpoint. I'll try to remember that one. Unfortunately for you, though, you forgot the single most important rule of sabacc."

"Yeah? And what's that?"

"A good bluff can beat any hand at all."



Thune offered no reply. A moment later, as the blaster butt came down on her head, she no longer had the opportunity. Mungo signaled two disguised guards to take her into custody. They carried her out to a waiting cell, while others attended to the two fallen bodyguards.

Lando placed both hands on his friend's shoulders. "Thank you, Mungo. You nearly died for me just now. Two of your people did, in fact. I'm so sorry. If there's anything I can...well..." He trailed off, not quite sure how to finish the sentence without sounding trite.

Mungo nodded soberly. "You were there for me. When Koong destroyed the only known Roonstones, when my Merchant Fleet was in danger of going under and all Auren and I had were some failing ships and a pair of secondhand droids, you funded my expedition to find another source. I owe everything I have to you." His voice hardened. "But I promise you one thing: Thune *will* pay for their deaths." Quietly, he followed the guards out of the room.

Lando sadly watched his friend leave, recalling how jovial Mungo had been when they were young. Being respectable had changed them both. He turned to the Zeltron, pulling off the man's wig to reveal a bald cranium with cybernetic implants and a skin tone far lighter than the pink on his face and hands. Lando eyed him thoughtfully. "You know, you look great with make-up and hair," he said. "You might want to consider a cosmetic overhaul when this is all over."

"That would not be my first choice, Lando," replied Lobot.

"When Thune grabbed you and shot the guards, I was sure it was all over. Who knew she'd choose you as a shield? If she hadn't gone for Mungo, I don't think we would have gotten out of that one. Thank you, Lobot," he said, then grinned. "And don't call me Lando."

* * *

Thune opened her eyes, blinking repeatedly as her dilating pupils grew accustomed to the brightness. She was seated at a drab gray table in an uncomfortable chair, and her injured hand had been bandaged. Lando sat across from her, flanked by Mungo Baobab. Lobot stood nearby, his arms behind his back, with three guards situated around the room.

The bounty hunter said nothing, waiting for them to speak first. Lando paused before doing so, hoping to increase her discomfort. "You're an interesting woman, Thune -- named after a pack animal on Dantooine, but a lot more dangerous. I've done some checking up on you through Mungo's sources."

"You found nothing, I'm sure," she replied coolly.

"Not one scrap of data, which intrigued me. The more successful hunters -- Fett, Valance, Cypher -- they're usually the ones with the fearsome reputations and getups. All they have to do is walk into a room and people tell them whatever they want." Lando paused, eyeing the scowling woman before him. "But not you. No one's heard of you, you hardly carry any weapons and you dress like you're going out for lunch at the Biscuit Baron. It's pretty unusual for a bounty hunter. And yet, the way you took apart the *Cobra* without killing me or Lobot, the way you saw through our little drama at the casino... that tells me you're just as good as the high-profile guys. Maybe even better. Plus, you managed to stick a tracer on my ship without Lobot or Mungo's best techs finding it. That concerns me, because eventually you're just going to come back and try again."

"You talk too much, Calrissian," Thune sneered. "It gives me a headache."

Mungo leaned forward, staring her directly in the eyes. "You've got a lot more than a headache coming, Thune. You might have had a deal for Lando and Lobot, but my people weren't part of it. You killed them without a contract, and that makes you a murderer."

"Entitling you to an all-expenses-paid vacation to the nearest Imperial detention center," Lando added.

Thune laughed, unimpressed. "You're one to talk, Calrissian -- or did you forget about the four employees of *mine* you tossed off into space? I suppose *that* wasn't murder, right? No, they weren't people -- they were just hired thugs. What a hypocrite you are."

Lando said nothing.

"Go ahead -- have me imprisoned," she continued. "But you'd be better off killing me. I'd just be out the next day anyway." Thune leaned forward, staring her captors down. "You found no record of my background because I *made* it that way. I've got allies among the Imperials. I do them special favors, and they set up contracts for me. Men like Dominic Raynor have more than money: They have power, and that means they have friends who'll make sure I'm back on your trail before you even have time to wax that ridiculous mustache."

"That's why you're sitting here instead of in an Imperial holding cell," Lando replied. "If your friends don't know you're in trouble, they can't bail you out."

Thune eyed both men. "All right, so you're not turning me over to the Empire, and you're not going to kill me -- or I'd be dead by now. Obviously, you're not just going to let me go, so let's skip all this macho posturing and get down to business."

"Actually," Lando admitted, "that's exactly what we're going to do. See, there's still the little issue of Dominic Raynor. Even if we did find a way to remove you from the picture, he'd just send someone else to take your place."

"So what's to stop me from coming back to finish the job?" Thune spat out.

"This," said Lando, nodding to his left.

Lobot placed a small metallic object against Thune's neck. The hunter resisted, but his grip immobilized her. The device made a small hiss, and she rubbed her neck, glaring. "What's going on here? What did that 'borg just do to me?"

Mungo leaned down on one knee, meeting Thune's stare at eye level. "Let me tell you about Roonstones," he began. "There's a particular stone called kessum--one of the more common rocks in the system, though its value as a gem is poor. It breaks apart too easily. We first thought it was about as useful as beach sand, until a member of my staff stuck a few kessums in his pocket to study, then forgot about them. As he left the lab, theft sensors picked up the stones and alerted Security, but the scanner kept pinpointing different locations outside his body, as if the stones were shifting position. He pulled out the rocks, but the scanner couldn't recognize them--even when he held them up in front of it. We later confirmed that kessum somehow randomly bounces electronic signals off surrounding objects. The potential for advances in tracer technology was staggering."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Thune demanded, shifting in her bonds.



"Because," Lando explained with his most ingratiating smile, "you've just had a sample of kessum injected into your bloodstream."

Thune tried to rise, but two guards forcefully pushed her back into her seat.

"Don't worry, it's completely harmless. You could eat a chunk of kessum every day for a year, and aside from a bad case of Tatooine-mouth, you'd be fine. But it's in there for life, buried so deep in your bloodstream no one will ever find it." Lando grinned darkly, savoring the moment. "That's for the tracer you put on the *Cobra*."

Thune sneered. "You just made a big mistake, Calrissian. You too, Baobab. If you think I'm going to let you inject a foreign substance into my body--"

"We'd be spot-on," Lando finished for her. "You seem to be forgetting the nature of kessum. Its exact location can't be pinpointed, but," he paused, "it *can* be traced to within a three-meter radius. If you come within a light-year of us, or either of our operations, I'll know, and certain associates of ours will track you down. They used to work for Bwahl the Hutt as interrogators. The results would be... messy."

Thune stared angrily, knowing he'd won. "Do I get to keep the *Faceted*?"

"You get your ship, your freedom and your life. I'd say the terms of the deal were fair, wouldn't you?"

"Only if you call keeping what I already had fair." But she didn't press the issue.

"There's a second part of this deal," Lando added, almost as an after-thought. "This one directly pertains to my situation with Raynor. Eliminating you from the picture only means he'll have to send someone else. Next time, it could be Boba Fett, and he has a personal grudge where I'm concerned that goes back years."

Mungo stepped in. "How much was Raynor paying you for Lando and Lobot?"

"200,000 credits."

"We'll pay you a tenth of that sum in Roonstones for Raynor's capture."

Thune scoffed. "You can't be serious. That wouldn't even cover my expenses."

"Fine. We'll get someone else. But consider this..." Lando pointed an index finger at the bounty hunter. "If we did, your usefulness to us would end right now. And Bwahl owes me."

"So what's to keep you from killing me after I get him for you?"

"Nothing -- except our gratitude for helping us deal with Raynor," Lando replied with a shrug. "You'd just have to trust us."

"I don't." She looked down at the table, her face impassive. "But I'll do it. At least this trip won't be a total loss."

* * *

The *Action Tidings* team worked overtime as the news began pouring in: Baron Administrator Lando Calrissian, thought killed in an explosion a few days before, alive and resuming control of Cloud City... his predecessor, Dominic Raynor, reported missing...a fire at the Club Baobab on Quilken, said to involve Calrissian and his cyborg liaison.

Surveying the city from a familiar perch, Lando welcomed the strong winds rustling his hair and cape. Lobot stood nearby, hands folded across his chest, his face impassive.

"It feels strange to be back," Lando sighed. "It's like nothing changed."

"Were you really expecting it to, sir?"

"Maybe. No, not really. It's just that when all the fanfare about our return died down, it didn't take long for the usual problems to come back to haunt me: shipping foul-ups, Guild inquiries, threats of another Ugnaught strike." Lando inhaled deeply. "At least the Raynor situation's been dealt with. By the time Bwahl's associates finish 'persuading' him to drop his vendetta, it's a safe bet we won't need to worry about him anymore. Looks like I'm back to being respectable." He paused for a moment to watch a flock of jocoscorros float by on gossamer wings.

"But I'll tell you one thing, Lobot," Lando added, leaning against a railing as he turned to his friend and grinned. "It sure felt good to be a scoundrel again."